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Freshmen Perceptions Of Academic Support In The Residence Halls

Katherine E. Schmidt

Eastern Illinois University

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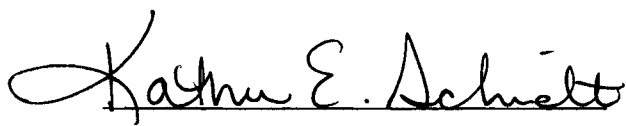
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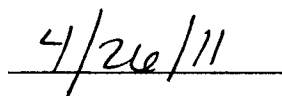
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Freshmen Perceptions of Academic Support in the Residence Halls

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Katherine E. Schmidt

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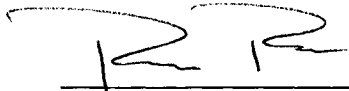
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FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science College Student Affairs

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

Spring 2011
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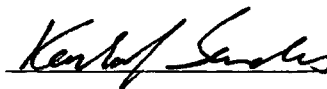
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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my siblings, Victoria and Nicholas. You have been the two greatest motivators in my life, always pushing me to be a better role model for you. I pray you find your passion in life as I have found mine and never lose sight of it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First I must begin by thanking the wonderful professionals and faculty members who have surrounded me and supported me through this process. To my thesis chair, Dr. Roberts, and committee members, Dr. Karla Sanders and Mr. Jody Stone, thank you so much for your time and dedication in seeing this project through the end. To my supervisor, Joshua Lawrie, thank you for remaining consistent and encouraging me through every step of the past two years.

To the young men and women who participated in my study. Thank you for giving your time and thoughts in helping not only me, but the field of student affairs, better understand what it is like to be a student in these times.

To my cohort, who together we made it through this wonderful and crazy past two years! Thank you for your unconditional support, endless laughter, inspiring stories, and insurmountable passion for the field of student affairs. We will make a difference in this world (even if it is by putting labels on trees)!

To Chris, thank you for your undying love and unconditional support. This thesis couldn't have been completed without you sitting next to me throughout the whole process and giving me the support I need to be successful. Even though at times we were each other's biggest distractions, we made it through together!

To my father, mother, sister and brother, without each one of you giving me your own unique form of love and support, I would not be in the position I am now. I know there were points where you had no idea what this thesis entailed or what I was talking about, but each one of you pushed me to keep working hard and do my best in whatever it was I had a passion for. I thank God daily for blessing me with such a wonderful, supportive, loving and crazy family.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of freshmen students on the subject of academic support in the residence halls. Prior research in the field indicated there are many different approaches to academic support in the residence halls such as the professional and resident assistant staff, academic programming as well as the physical environment, and exploring living learning community programs. The prior research also indicated the need to identify the unique millennial generational needs as well as the goals of integrative learning. A qualitative study was conducted in three focus group settings to gain an understanding of the perceptions of 14 freshman students on the academic support they feel is received in the residence halls as well as the support they wish to see in relation to characteristics of living-learning communities. General themes and categories from participant responses were critically evaluated. The findings suggest students do not perceive professional staff members to be forms of academic support and felt the need to keep their home and academic life separate. These findings are followed by a discussion section connecting the participant responses to prior research, as well as recommendations for administrators to consider when taking into account the development of academic support for freshmen in the residence hall setting.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Universities understand that in today's economic climate and increased world competition for creating the best and brightest, both retaining students and maximizing their learning experience is vital to their future (Peach, 2005). For this reason various ideas have been proffered to move Higher Education toward best practices concerning retention and learning. Once such idea is a movement referred to as "Integrative learning." Integrative learning provides environments, opportunities, and activities that enable students to connect between their intellectual study and personal life, between their formal education and world as well as between their knowledge and social responsibility (Gale, Huber & Hutchings, 2005). It is thought by intentionally "nudging" students toward learning both inside and outside the classroom, students are more likely to stay engaged and thus maintain their enrollment through matriculation.

Another idea to engage and thus retain students is to create themed communities within the resident halls. Marchland (2010) explored themed housing not in the academic sense, but in popular culture. Institutions have created "Harry Potter" and "Anime" communities among others where students can chose to live based on their interests. These students are encouraged to include their personal interests into their living and learning environments which help create a well-rounded and enjoyable experience, which in turn increases retention.

A more academically oriented approach to themed housing is what has become known as Living-Learning Communities (LLC). LLC's are the planned intersection of

residential living (social experience) and student development (academic experience). Decoster and Riker (2008) stated that the environment in which students live influences their behavior and that learning is a total comprehensive process. A housing program should be one that strives to enhance the physical and interpersonal environment, to create the learning environment ensuring students are a member of overlapping communities which enhance their classroom experience. The LLC can provide this overlap by engaging faculty and students in the halls where students live and encouraging learning to take place not only in the classroom, but everywhere. Living communities typically center on a specific academic program and group students in similar majors as roommates and neighbors to help foster the community. Students typically choose to live in these types of environments and create a sense of ownership and pride, which increases student achievement and retention (Sheely & Whalen, 2005).

Housing students in communities according to Marchland (2010) in the interest of their learning, development, and academic achievement is not a new concept but new ways of ensuring students have these experiences are consistently being developed based on student needs, wants, and personal and academic interests.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to identify the perceptions of freshmen students on issues of the academic support they receive in the residence halls at a comprehensive, mid-sized Midwestern University. The second purpose of this study is to identify if characteristics of a living-learning community match perceptions of the students.

The problems which inspired interest in this study are the changing needs of today's millennial students and the support they require to complete a four-year degree.

Even though nationally 80% of college freshmen attain a GPA to continue from the first year to the second year, only 55% complete a degree (Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2007). Mortenson (2006) indicated the academic stress level of a college student is higher than it has been in the past and is creating more issues for the incoming freshmen. This issue presses the need to indicate what students need to handle stress and be supported academically. Another issue is the question of whether or not a LLC is the appropriate or needed program to help students integrate what they are learning in the classroom into their everyday lives and be the support to help them through the first year of their higher education experience (Eck, J., Edge, H., & Stephenson, K., 2007).

Research Questions

Research questions were developed in relation to previous research on the ideal living learning community. The research questions are:

R1: What are students' perceptions of the quality of academic support they receive from residence hall staff? (Chickering, 2006)

R2: What are students' perceptions of the quality of academic programming offered in the residence halls? (Bidgood, May, & Saebi, 2006)

R3: What are students' perceptions of the overall quality of the physical environment within the residence halls in relation to student learning? (Decoster and Riker, 2008, Hill, 2004)

R4: In what way are the students' perceptions comparable to previous research on living-learning communities? (Eck, J., Edge, H., & Stephenson, K., 2007).

Significance of the Study

Chickering (2006) stated that as academic and student affairs professionals, we must follow the three R's of supporting student learning: recognize, respect, and respond. First, we must recognize the unique needs students are presenting. Without recognizing their diverse needs and styles of learning, we are in danger of creating an idealized student where one size fits all rather than the hard work of tailoring programs around their unique needs. Second, respecting diverse needs is crucial to student engagement in programming and support. Student centered learning is the basis of engaging students and responding to their needs through programming which is providing them with the support they need. Third, actively responding in a timely manner to the needs and challenges of an ever changing student population and demographic ensures students will stay engaged and thus continue with their education. Using methods which were implemented 20 years ago will not meet the needs of today's student and therefore hinder student learning. Chickering argues that recognizing, respecting and responding to the needs of today's students through programming, engagement and support will ensure student learning outcomes are met and success is attainable to any student.

Little research has been done to investigate the unique needs and perceptions of students living in a residence hall in relation to Living-Learning Communities. In order to meet the diverse needs of today's students outlined by Chickering, information needs to be taken directly from students living on campus and experiencing academic stress and struggles and are in need of support systems. Therefore, this research study focused on gathering information directly from college students so housing departments can develop and implement academic support services within their residence halls. The information

given by students through qualitative research has the potential to provide an outline of what students would like to see within their residential living and learning environment, which in turn could provide crucial information for the development and strengthening of academic support programs in and outside of the residential environment.

Limitations of the Study

Although there are many studies examining student development within residence halls, the studies on academic support for students living in residence halls is limited. This lack of context suggested a qualitative approach might be useful in gathering in-depth data. Therefore, qualitative interviews were conducted with three focus groups from three different living environments: one all-male residence hall, one all-female residence hall and one mixed gender residence hall. Although the limited number of 14 interviewees and settings provided a better understanding on this topic, no attempt should be made to generalize these results to the larger population of students living in residence halls throughout the United States. These results should not be interpreted beyond an understanding of living-learning communities by the persons interviewed for the present study.

Definitions of Terms

Living-Learning Communities: Communities in which students pursue a similar academic curriculum as well as live together in a similar portion of a residence hall during their freshman year.

Integrative Learning: Provides environments, opportunities, and activities that enable students to connect between their intellectual study and personal life, between their formal education and world as well as between their knowledge and social responsibility

Academic Support: Considered to be the physical living environment of the residence hall, academic programming provided in the hall, and support created and given by hall staff.

Freshman: Referencing students who are attending their first semester at an institution of higher education. This does not include transfer students or non-traditional students. Students are within the ages of 17-20 years old.

Resident Director (RD): Full time live-in professional staff member who manages the day-to-day operations of the hall as well as works to support and develop the students living in the residence hall.

Associate Resident Director (ARD): A graduate student who is a live-in staff member who supports and aids the resident director. The ARD is also responsible for supporting and developing students living in the residence hall.

Summary

The need for universities to increase retention has led to the development of many new strategies for ensuring student success and support. Strategies including integrative learning, themed living-learning communities, and student programs for academic support are all being implemented on campuses world-wide. The question which remains, however, is whether students are responding to these implemented programs and ideas. Development of support programs should be planned based on both student development theory such as Chickering's recognize, respecting, and responding as well as on what students perceive they need to be successful. This study aims to identify what students perceive are effective staff, successful academic support programs, and

environmental structure within housing which will serve to add to the body of knowledge concerning the implementation of living learning communities.

CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

According to Barefoot, Gardner, and Upcraft (2005) historically, higher education leaders took the position that students should be held responsible for either sinking or swimming, especially within the first year of college. Statistics show that the odds of sinking are the same as swimming. For the past few decades, college graduation rates have been steady around 50% (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Many factors impact retention including student support during the first year. This chapter will explore the four crucial areas of support found to be important in retaining freshman students. These include residential life, unique needs of first year students, living-learning communities, and integrative learning.

Residential Life

The role of residence life staff living in the residence hall among the students they help support and advise is crucial according to a study done by Deschamps and Shaikh (2006). The study focused on the physical and psychological health of a freshman student the first few weeks being away from home. The qualitative study found through interviews that students rely heavily on their peers for advice when struggling with issues such as their personal health and academics. Deschamps and Shaikh call on the field of student affairs to encourage the use of trained student advisors and professionals in the residence halls to help counsel the students on finding the correct type of medical treatment and academic support.

Riehle and Witt (2009) found in the area of academic programming in the residence halls, students will attend but only when there is incentive or someone directly asks them to attend. The study, which was aimed at the integration of librarians into the residence hall, developed a program which allowed the librarians to come into the residence hall to teach students basic tips when developing a research paper. In total, 109 out of 3,500 students attended the program and 61% of attendees had favorable responses in an evaluation after the program was completed. The researchers followed up by saying the program was largely successful due to the incentive of free food and the help of the resident assistants in persuading students to attend.

Living in a residence hall, students look to much more than just the students and staff within it for support. The actual structure itself and the layout of the building can contribute to the academic and social climate of the hall. Hill (2004) stated:

The contemporary residence hall is less like a shelter than an incubator in the sense that it facilitates the sharing of ideas among students, contributes to emotional growth, and promotes the development of peer relationships. Beyond these goals, residence halls are also helping schools to rekindle a sense of community and foster a sense of place. This is not to say that academic life has decreased in value or significance, only that quality of life issues are emerging as an important, if not equivocal, priority for many schools. Residential life is growing enormously, both as a methodology and a practice (p. 2).

Administrators also think that students who have access to study groups and areas conducive to studying in their living environment use that space and are more likely to encourage their roommates to study as well. Hill (2004) stated that the working world is

much more team-oriented than individual oriented and giving students the place to begin those interactions is key.

In their study on residence hall design, Brandon, Cameron and Hirt (2008) discovered that 19% of student interactions are regarding academics in traditional-style halls compared to 8% of interactions in suite style halls. The reasoning behind this conclusion was that there are more interactions happening between rooms in a traditional setting versus only interacting with suitemates when living in a suite-style building.

Beyond the physical aspect of the residence hall, research indicates social groups and gender also impact academic performance. Arboleda, Shelley II, Whalen, & Yongyi (2004) found that less socially active females within the residence halls achieved higher GPA's. The researchers concluded that women who were less socially active used isolation as a time to study. As is true with females, socially active males within the residence halls had lower GPA's than less active males. The study also concluded that men who lived in an all male hall had higher academic achievement.

The living environment can have an impact on how the student perceives the classroom. Lichtenstein (2005) stated students who had a negative experience in the learning community focused more on the teaching style of the professor, and had disagreements with the syllabus and assignment style. Without fostering a supportive academic environment, residential life staff may be impacting the classroom atmosphere as well.

The Needs of First Year students

According to Barefoot, Gardner, and Upcraft (2005), first-year students are concerned primarily with passing their classes and matriculating to the second year. In

contrast, administrators and faculty members expect students to experience a wide array of integrative learning including growth and development in areas such as multicultural awareness, spiritual exploration, health and wellness, civic duty, meaningful relationships and academic competence (Barefoot, Gardner, and Upcraft, 2005). The question remains, however, are students receiving the comprehensive support necessary to meet everyone's expectations and goals?

Demographics of the first-year student have drastically changed over the past decade and continue to change at a rapid pace. Barefoot, Gardner, and Upcraft (2005) claim institutions are encountering a higher number of non-traditional students who are older, already have families, and are or have been out in the work force for several years. A wider variety of cultures are being represented through the diversification of race and ethnicity on campus through minority groups which reside in the United States as well as the steady increase of international students.

In addition to changing demographics, Barefoot, et al. (2005) also commented that today's incoming first year students are presenting a broader array of personal challenges. For example, increased mental and physical health problems are following students to college and causing a demand for more availability of counseling and health services. "The cost of education is rising faster than the cost of health care (p. 36)" (Benton, 2010) making it difficult for many students to afford tuition, room and board along with fees. Students are being forced to work part-time and sometimes full time jobs to pay for their education. This added stress exacerbates the mental and physical health needs of incoming students.

Bidgood, May & Saebi (2006) sought to gain perceptions of students and faculty members regarding factors that impact completion rates in college. The population studied was a cohort of students who took classes together over a one year period. One of the main themes of this research was that students perceive they will only receive help if they directly ask for it. Another theme of this study was that students perceive a stronger level of support from those professors rated as highly effective. Lastly, students indicated that having different professors made it difficult to establish the kind of bond that would make it easier to ask for support. More one-on-one interaction was perceived by the students as a significant benefit to improving academic support.

Living- Learning Communities

Kramer et al (2007) posed the idea of expanding student learning beyond the walls of the classroom into new and innovative ideas. Suggestions include redefining what the word “teacher” should include. There are many staff, administrators, and others on each campus who may be considered teachers. The living-learning community environment fosters this type of student learning which allows teaching to occur by everyone, including student-to-student interaction.

Results of the study conducted by Stassen (2003) showed that students who are enrolled in the living-learning community program had more positive outcomes in the areas of first year academic achievement and retention. It was found that the less rigorous the academic climate within the living learning community, the better the students performed. Ultimately, it was found that students who were used to interacting in the academic environment had better outcomes during their first year.

Eck, Edge, & Stephenson (2007) also indicated living learning communities (LLC) increased the amount of social interaction and academic achievement among first year students. Students enrolled in LLC programs had developed stronger critical thinking skills and had an overall better understanding of their own wellness. LLC students also indicated they found their classes to be more engaging and effective.

Lichtenstein (2005) studied first year learning communities and concluded that students who were involved in two of the same linked courses (LCC students took the same two courses) perceived enhanced positive interactions, group cohesion and friendships. The students who had a positive experience in the learning community had higher levels of academic achievement based on GPA. Retention rates with freshman learning community students and non freshman learning community students showed no significant difference.

Overall, students who were enrolled in the LLC program enjoyed having coordinated classes and syllabi and collaboration between the professors. It was also found that because students were spending time together in these linked classes, they were more likely to form friendships and collaborate on projects and have a smoother transition into college (Lichtenstein, 2005).

Akkoyunlu & Yilmaz-Soylu (2009) indicated there is no effect on student achievement from learning in different environments based on their learning style. The study was assessed and evaluated using Kolb's learning styles and Mayer's information processing. The three environments studied were text, narrated, and computer based learning environments. Students responded to Kolb's assessment that gauged the effectiveness of certain learning environments. The results of the study showed that

overall there were no significant findings or differences between each of the learning environments and the students' learning styles.

The effects of living-learning communities have been shown to go much farther than the students they are serving. Brower, Inkelas, and Longerbeam, (2007) conducted a study which looked at the effects of a living-learning community on non-LLC participating students. The results found that students who do participate as well as those students who live in the same community and hall but do not participate in living learning programs both benefit from them in a few areas. Living learning communities were found to be beneficial in the areas of perception of a socially supportive residence hall and the positive diverse interactions the students were able to have. One area that did not show significance was the students' perceptions on academically supportive residence halls.

Non-L/L students living in L/L buildings notice that everyone is helpful to one another and that the building environment is generally supportive of academic achievement and success. They see that most students appear to appreciate racial, religious, and sexual-orientation differences among residents, and they notice that students from differing racial and ethnic backgrounds interact with one another (p. 27)

Sheely and Whalen (2005) concluded students who indicated living in a living-learning community were more likely to prefer to return to the residence halls upon their second year than students who did not participate in a LLC environment during their freshman year. The indication of LLC's contributing to the retention of students in their second year reinforces the success of the programs.

Integrative Learning

The concept behind the integrative learning initiative is to help students connect their classroom experience across all aspects of their campus, community, professional and personal life. Administrators are encouraging students through this process to strengthen and continue their learning after they leave campus. Students must learn from a variety of sources and experiences in order to be educated citizens of the world. These experiences should be balanced in the areas of theory and practice (Gale, Huber & Hutchings, 2005).

Many institutions of higher education have partnered with the Carnegie Foundation and the Association of American College and Universities to implement the integrative learning concept on their campuses. LaGuardia Community Colleges adopted the learning initiative and has implemented several changes that encourage students to connect their first day on campus with their last. LaGuardia has implemented such programs as E-portfolios which are kept through students' entire campus career and linked courses or learning communities through their first and second semesters in attendance (Acario, Clark, & Eynon, 2005).

To support these programs, institutions are developing new ways to connect the academic programs and campus life. A few ways which have been suggested are the implementation of first-year learning communities and senior-year capstone courses which allow for the integration of other departments, such as student housing (Gale, Huber & Hutchings, 2005).

Summary

In cumulating the research described above, several themes have emerged. Prior research in the field of residence life, living-communities, and integrative learning provides important concepts and theories for Student Affairs Administrators to take into account. Attention needs to be paid to the current graduation rates of our students and the factors which influence student retention and success. Beginning with first year students, the environment in which they spend a majority of their time should be supportive of the unique needs of the student; one of these areas is residential life. The physical environment of a residence hall can play a large role in the way a student is able to study or feel like they have an open and accepting place where they are able to carry out their academic goals. This is impacted by how residence halls are built and the resources which are a part of the physical nature of the hall in which they reside. The needs of first year students today have developed and change rapidly and require the attention of Student Affairs professionals. Students are facing a wider array of challenges and are requiring more support over all areas of their lives.

In order to respond to these unique challenges, residential life has began to integrate academic life into its programs and has developed living-learning communities. Living-learning communities have been shown to produce students who have had more positive outcomes in the areas of freshman year academics and retention. These communities keep students interested and help them develop in areas such as critical thinking and are generally more supportive overall.

The tie between academics and residential life is a part of a large movement called integrative learning which pushes faculty, staff and students to make the college

experience holistic and to connect the beginning to the end. The classroom experience is expected to be connected to all aspects of students' lives.

The following chapter will outline the methodology and procedures utilized for collection and treatment of data by the primary researcher, and will provide information regarding research participants, the setting of the study, and the focus group techniques utilized.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to gain information on first-year students' perceptions on academic support within their residence hall. Specifically, participants were asked to share their perceptions on academic support, academic programming, and whether the residence hall environment is conducive to learning. The participants were first-semester male and female participants from three separate residence halls on a comprehensive Midwestern university's campus.

The research questions presented were targeted at discovering if the perceptions presented aim at an ideal community much like a living-learning community and whether or not participants found interest in what an environment such as a living-learning community could produce.

The research questions were:

R1: What are students' perceptions of the quality of academic support they receive from residence hall staff? (Chickering, 2007; Bidgood, May, & Saebi, 2006)

R2: What are students' perceptions of the quality of academic programming offered in the residence halls? (Bidgood, May, & Saebi, 2006)

R3: What are students' perceptions of the overall quality of the physical environment within the residence halls in relation to student learning? (Decoster and Riker, 2008; Hill, 2004.)

+R4: In what way are the students' perceptions comparable to previous research on living-learning communities? (Eck, J., Edge, H., & Stephenson, K., 2007).

A qualitative design was used to gather student perceptions. Qualitative design allowed for commonalities to emerge in the form of themes, instead of quantitative or numeric data. The purpose of this study was not to determine cause and effect or correlate two sets of data, but to uncover phenomena of those involved (Merriam, 2009).

Focus groups were formed in order to gain insight and facilitate discussion between students. Questions were formulated in advance and were structured to direct students to speak on topics of academics in the residence halls. All data were transcribed and analyzed for common themes expressed (Patton, 2002).

Participants

The participants for the study came from three residence halls on campus. Each of the residence halls had a separate and unique environment. The first is an all-female hall which housed freshmen through graduate students; the second is an all-male hall also housing freshmen through graduate students. The third residence hall is a co-educational and predominately freshman building.

The first participant in group one (1:1) was an 18-year-old Caucasian male majoring in management information systems and was not involved in any extra-curricular activities. Participant 1:2 was an 18-year-old Caucasian male who was undecided about his major and did not participate in extracurricular activities. Participant 1:3 was a 19-year-old Caucasian male majoring in pre-engineering who was not involved in any extracurricular activities. Participant 1:4 was a 18-year-old Caucasian male who was an English major and not involved in any extracurricular activities.

Participant 2:1 was an 18-year-old Caucasian female whose major was English with teacher certification. She was involved in hall council and a traveling comedy group. Participant 2:2 was an 18-year-old Caucasian female majoring in communication disorders and sciences. She was involved in the dance team. Participant 2:3 was an 18 year old Caucasian female majoring in English and was not involved in any extracurricular activities. Participant 2:4 was an 18-year-old Caucasian female majoring in art education. She also was a volunteer for art theatre and was involved in dance. Participant 2:5 was an 18-year-old Caucasian female majoring in elementary education. She was not involved in any extracurricular activities.

Participant 3:1 was an 18-year-old Caucasian female majoring in English. She was not involved in any extracurricular activities but worked as a desk assistant. Participant 3:2 is a 19-year-old Caucasian female majoring in marketing. She was involved in the American Marketing Association. Participant 3:3 was an 18-year-old Caucasian female majoring in elementary education. She also was not involved in any extracurricular activities but worked as a desk assistant. Participant 3:4 was a 19-year-old Caucasian male who was undecided. He was not involved in any extracurricular activities. Participant 3:5 was a 19-year-old Caucasian male majoring in business management. He was involved in university board.

Site

The study was conducted on the campus of a mid-sized Midwestern university. The current undergraduate and graduate enrollment was 11,966 students. There are 44 undergraduate degrees offered as well as 25 graduate degrees. The on-campus population was approximately 4,500 undergraduate and graduate students. There are 12

residence halls and 19 on campus Greek affiliated residential houses. The population of the city in which the institution resides is approximately 22,000 which included the student population.

The male hall houses approximately 400 male students in two four-floor towers. There were eight resident assistants, one associate resident director, and one complex director. The female hall houses 400 female students in one nine-floor tower. There were eight resident assistants, one associate resident director, and one resident director. The coeducational hall houses 800 students who are predominately freshmen in two nine-floor towers. There were 16 resident assistants, three associate resident directors, and one complex director. The staff of these three halls oversee the daily operations, facilitate community interactions, and enforce departmental and university policies in the hall.

Data Collection

Participants in the focus groups were chosen through snowball sampling. Student names were offered by the associate resident directors, resident directors, and complex directors of the building and invitations to participate were solicited by the researcher. The purpose for snowball sampling allowed for the best selection of information-rich participants. Specific characteristics were identified so the sample of students was diverse and well balanced in group dynamics (Patton, 2002). Students were asked to participate until five students from each of the three buildings accepted.

Participants were selected in early October of the 2010-2011 academic year. Personal letters were sent out asking for their participation in a focus group in late October 2010. Focus group times were scheduled and held within each individual residence hall that correlates with the students. Questions focused on the students'

experiences and perceptions of the academic support provided and given to them throughout the first three months of their undergraduate experience. Questions also identified if students felt characteristics of living-learning communities would be beneficial or interesting to them to implement.

Treatment of the Data

Data was collected by interviewing the three focus groups utilizing video/audio digital recorders and transcribed on the primary researcher's personal computer. Participant names were not transcribed, but replaced with pseudonyms. The data was copied onto a disk which remained locked in a safe owned by the primary researcher. Following the study, all data related to the focus groups were retained for three years and then destroyed.

Summary

This was a qualitative study that used focus groups as the sole source of data collection. Focus groups were held in the residence halls in which the student lived. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed to look for themes which emerged in the similarities between participant responses.

CHAPTER IV

Results

The following research questions were asked to examine how college freshmen perceived academic support related to all female, all male, and coeducational environments. Specifically, the research questions were utilized to pursue how freshman students perceived their academic support in relation to staff, programming, and physical environment. A final research question was posed to gain more information on student perceptions of living-learning community programming.

Throughout this chapter, Group #1 will refer to the all male focus group, Group #2 will refer to the all female focus group, and Group #3 will refer to the coeducational focus group. Individuals within the focus groups are also identified by number. For example, the first participant in the first focus group is identified as 1:1, the first person in the second focus group is identified as 2:1. The four research questions were asked by the primary investigator to facilitate discussion within each focus group. All interviews were conducted in a private room in the residence halls where each group resided. Focus group participant responses are outlined in this chapter by research question, as well as other emerging themes found throughout the research process.

Research Question Results

Research Question #1: What are students' perceptions of the quality of academic support they receive from residence hall staff?

Concerning perceptions of academic support by staff, focus group subjects gave consistent responses. All groups expressed limited to no interactions with their resident director (RD) about classes or academics as a whole. Although participants experienced little interaction in this area, they also perceived their resident director to be trustworthy and knowledgeable should they need academic advice. So the participants knew their hall staff but did not perceive them as someone to utilize for academic support.

Participant 1:3 reflected this perception in the following statement:

I feel that their job is more on the caring side or to help make community. I don't really feel like it's their job to help you with your academics. Now, if your social life or something like that leaks over into your academics I feel like they need to intervene to help you out there but as far as just purely academics I don't think that's their job in my mind anyways. I have no idea if it is their job.

Other participants shared this feeling. Even though some had a good relationship with the resident director, they would not necessarily go to them first, if at all, for academic help. Staff directors are not perceived as having the detailed knowledge to advise them on specific classes or assignments. Participant 1:2 stated the following:

They aren't friends for that kind of thing; there are other people I could go to. But I guess if I really needed to, like if (name of resident director) went through the same major as me I would be able to go to him and ask for help. I know I would be able to but they don't have the same major and stuff like that, but I know I could go to them if I needed to.

It is evident through these reactions that freshmen do not feel comfortable approaching the resident directors because they feel RDs could not give significant amounts or specific help in classes. All participants expressed, much like participant 1:2, that if they felt resident directors were a last resort, they would trust them and their position enough to go to for help.

Group #3 indicated they had more interaction with their resident directors than the other groups. They mentioned general academics and leadership in the hall as two areas emphasized by their director. Participant 3:2 spoke about feeling some stress as a result of the resident director's emphasis on academic excellence and being involved in several activities within the hall such as hall leadership and event planning.

They really try to tell us to put academics first because I know I am involved in a lot of things here at (name of residence hall) and they are always like yeah you have to do your homework first and sometimes I do feel that they are pushing you to do a lot of things in the hall when you should be doing your homework.

Participant perceptions of their resident assistants (RA) were different than their resident directors. Living on the same floor as the participants made the RA more readily available and approachable as they see the students almost every day. Participant 1:2 expressed this by stating he feels very comfortable with his RA and connected because they both are going through similar academic struggles.

You can go to him for educational issues or anything honestly. He's really approachable. He's really accepting now that I am there and if I do want to go to

him for like problems with grades I could go to him. He wouldn't like act like I was wasting his time or anything.

Those participants who perceived their RA as available and approachable stated they had confidence their RA would support them during times of academic struggle.

Participant 1:1 did not find his RA approachable and felt he would be a burden if he brought any academic concerns to his RA.

My RA he puts up stuff just in case you need help with school and stuff. We have a little board he puts stuff up on that but it's up on the opposite end of the floor. He's a very studious person. He has like a 4.0 or something and makes me never want to bother him or get connected to him. I heard he has a really good GPA and I have heard, you know that he's had to tell people below him to calm down with the noise and I was like I would really hate to bother him.

In other words, participants thought a lower level of interaction or a problem with an RA would impede going to them for academic support. Participant 1:1 was concerned that he would be a burden to his RA if he approached him about academic concerns because his RA was also a student with academic needs. He had no interactions with the RA around his classes and the only thing he had seen posted on the floor was on a bulletin board. The lack of interaction has led the participant to not find support in his living community.

Participant 3:2 had low interaction with her RA as well and found a lack of support because of an incident which did not go well.

For me it's a bit different. I had trouble with my roommate and the problems were never resolved, like we are fine now but I had to resolved it myself. I think it was just over time but I approached my RA about it and she didn't do anything about it. I don't think I would feel good about approaching her about big things again.

It is the quality and quantity between RAs and their residents that enhance or impede the support participants perceive as being academically supported or not. Participant 3:2 had a negative interaction with their RA and therefore would no longer feel or seek support in anyway, including academically.

Overall, there were three themes that emerged from this research question. One theme was that academic support from residence hall staff is perceived by students to be there if they need it. Participants expressed it is important to have a relationship with the staff member before seeking support from them academically. The second theme emerged regarding if there had been a previous negative encounter with the staff member there was less of a chance the student would seek support or perceive that academic support was even available through the staff member. Lastly, the more positive interactions had outside academics with the staff member the greater the participants felt academic support was available.

Research Question#2: What are students' perceptions of the quality of academic programming offered in the residence halls?

In regards to academic programming, participants expressed little experience or interest in attending academic programming offered within the residence hall by either

staff members or other departments on campus. All groups came to a consensus that they did not want to spend their free time outside of class going to programming that included academic issues. They were much more likely to attend a social program instead of an academic one. Participant 3:2 spoke about this idea.

I know there are a lot of things they put on to help you educationally I know they had writing workshops but the thing is that if I had the free time to go to those that is not what I would be choosing to do with my free time. I would much rather go to something where I can have fun and socialize.

Participant 2:2 continued this idea saying “I don’t know if I would want to go to a program just to learn about study tips at night when I could be doing other things.” Other participants stated they were aware of academic programming such as study tables and tutors but did not attend them because they were not struggling in those areas. Participant 1:1 said they would go, but only if it was pertinent to their major course work. “It depends on if it was for my major. Why would you go to something that you don’t need to attend?”

When asked why they would not or do not attend these programs, participants stated they can find other, more direct resources for specific areas in which they are struggling. Participant 1:4 stated “They have math tutoring in the department, but I had to go find that on my own”. Participant 2:2 felt there was no need to talk in the residence hall about academics or program around academics due to the unique nature of each student and their own struggles through classes. They felt it was the duty of the student

to seek out the appropriate help, and not the need of the residence hall to gather everyone living in the residence hall to speak about the issues.

I feel like the student kind of does it on their own time. I recently went to the writing center for the first time because I had a paper that I needed help on. It depends on whether you find it on your own and I have my own study tips and I just find out from people in my major and we talk about it and I don't need someone to have to sit down for an hour and talk about it.

The overall theme which emerged in discussion was that students do not attend academic programming because they can receive more focused attention from their professors and departments. They prefer that resident halls schedule social over academic programming. It appears a more intentional approach to academic programming is needed to promote integrative learning.

Research Question #3: What are students' perceptions of the overall quality of the physical environment within the residence halls in relation to student learning?

One theme that emerged about the resident halls' physical environment and their impact on student learning was their location in relation to campus classrooms. Participant 2:2 stated they would be less likely to attend classes if the academic building was a far walk from her residence hall. "I think where it is just fine I have to go to (name of academic building) all the time too but people who have classes in (name of academic building) I would not want to go all the way over there". Participant 3:5 lived in the residence hall which was furthest from central campus and was already getting anxious about going to class in the winter. "I can't wait till it starts snowing, I bet there is at least

one week I don't go to classes because it will be way too cold outside and I will just stay here because it is too far to walk."

According to these participants, a close proximity of the residence hall to the academic classroom is highly prized and although not realistic, something Higher Education should address for those students living further removed from central campus. Some participants simply avoid returning to the resident hall and felt forced to study elsewhere. As participant 3:5 stated

Usually I will get up and leave (name of residence hall) once and I don't come back until night because while I like the hall and everything it is definitely the island because there is a good 5 to 10 minute walk to campus and at least a 10 minute walk to the library. So usually I get up and go to class and then I spend the rest of my day on campus like in the library or the union.

Another theme that emerged in all three focus groups was the availability of wi-fi internet in all of the basements and main residence hall lounges. Participants appreciated the fact that they could utilize wi-fi throughout the building, an especially important issue during times when their roommates or floor mates are being disruptive. Participant 2:4 and 1:3 reinforced this theme.

I can study in my dorm but if I like my roommate was sleeping or doing something I have gone in the basement to practice my speech or to do other things because you can get wi-fi there so you can still do your work. This building just got wi-fi. We didn't have it at the beginning and that helps a lot because it means you can basically study anywhere and you can get away from your room.

Perceptions regarding the physical aspect of the building emphasized the importance of location of the residence hall in relation to their classes as well as the ability to move to quiet places in the building other than their residence hall room to study. It was important for the participants to have internet connectivity out of their rooms so they could continue to study and do homework with fewer distractions. It was also important for the participant to feel close to their classes so they could return to their rooms for short break to study and do homework during the day, instead of having to stay on campus.

Research Question #4: In what way are the students' perceptions comparable to previous research on living-learning communities?

During focus group discussion two participants brought up the idea of living-learning communities without being asked. In both instances they had a friend who attended another institution and had or was currently residing in a living-learning community. Both had positive remarks about the program. Participant 1:3 stated the following:

I know some colleges have residence halls by majors and so you are grouped with other people with your major and that would be really helpful. I never really thought about a learning community but that would be a great deal honestly, now that I think about it you are paying quite a bit to go to college and I feel like that would help your education quite a bit.

In speaking with their friend about their experience on a living learning community, participant 2:2 spoke of many positive aspects.

Well from what I've heard about it my friend where she lives it's your home first and then it's the math floor second. I like the idea because it's like if ever you need help there is someone on your floor that knows what you are talking about. My roommate is a special education major and we don't take any of the same classes and if I need help with something with one of my classes she can't really help me because she doesn't really know what is going on.

Participant 2:2 and participant 1:3 had heard of positive experiences their friends had at other institutions which in turn made them amenable to idea of implementing living-learning communities on their own campus. They especially liked the idea that there could be immediate help from peers living on the same floor.

Participants who had negative interactions with friends residing in living-learning communities vocalized more negative perceptions about the program. Specifically participants found that living-learning communities lacked diversity. Many participants stated that participating in a living-learning community would lessen their opportunities to meet students from diverse backgrounds, especially in the area of academics. Participant 2:5 stated that she would have never met some of her good friends if she would have been living in a living-learning community.

The only bad thing I could also think of would be you can't really branch out because all of the same people are in your classes or on your floor like if we did that I never would have met one of my best friends here and you really can't branch out as well if you were all in the same major you would just see the same people all the time.

Participant 3:1 was given the opportunity to live on a floor with mostly honors students during her freshmen year which she perceived as similar to living-learning communities. She chose not to participate for fear that there would be too much emphasis on academics without a balance in the social area.

I don't think I would like it. I'm in the honors college so they have the option of living on the floor with all honors students and I was like no. First of all you are going to get those people who are really into it and they are going to be like oh my gosh let's do this all the time and they will keep bugging you about it and you are also going to get the people that don't do anything but study.

Participant 3:3 was passionate about not residing on a living-learning community and went compared it to a restrictive government. "I wouldn't like that. I want the diversity in the floor I want to talk to people in different majors it sounds kind of communist. You are trying to make everyone the same!"

Participant 1:4 saw two sides to having an academically diverse community. He felt that knowing more people in their major would help him feel academically supported, but knowing students from other majors has also been a good experience.

I really don't know too many English majors so it would be kind of cool to like interact with them more but at the same time like every person I've met has been an awesome person so it's kind of cool to have a melting pot.

Another theme which emerged was that participants perceived living-learning communities differently based on gender. The men felt the competitive nature would be helpful in pushing them to be academically successful. Participant 1:3 was the first one

to bring up the competitive nature of living and learning in the same place as others in your program.

I think that another pro that hasn't been mentioned yet is competitiveness aspect of it. I know different people are different, but if my like roommate or some other people on my floor were in the same classes as me, I would want to beat them!

Participant 1:1 echoed this comment and reflected on how it would help them set higher personal and on-going standards for themselves. "It helps to set the bar a little higher and push you a little more. It's motivational."

The female participants also identified competitiveness as a result of living-learning communities, but not in a positive manner. They felt the programs they were in were quite competitive on their own, and if several women in the same major were living together, there would be less room for friendships and connections because of the competition that would arise. Participant 2:2 stated they would be worried about the competition of getting into the program and even succeeding in the program and thought no one would help each other at all.

I was thinking more so that I would be worried about the competition and that everyone wouldn't want to share ideas like what are you going to do for this paper and no one will want to share anymore what they are going to do. I would be worried. My field that I am going into is very competitive and a lot of people go out for it and I'm like not even usually around the other people and I'm worried about getting into the program.

Other Themes

Several other emerging themes were identified by the focus groups. These themes were related to sources of academic support, interactive and social living communities and variations of living-learning communities.

Theme #1 Interactive communities makes academic life seem easier

When asked what they like best about their residence hall, some participants stated they liked the social interaction which encourages a sense of community. This sense of community encouraged them to make connections with their neighbors in more ways than just over the football game or the social activities of the weekend. Participant 1:3 said he felt comfortable talking and interacting with the other residents on his floor, to the point where he did not feel ashamed or made fun of for openly wanting to work on homework. “Sometimes I have to kick people out of my room, like kick them out because I have to get stuff done. And they are usually understanding like, ‘yea get good grades’.”

Participant 3:2 thought the RA has a large influence on how the floor interacts together and creates community which is supportive and social in all areas, including academics. Small things done by the RA in the community helped build connections between residents.

My RA will write like in erasable marker on the mirror in the bathroom all of the information we need to know in places we can see. We have meetings every week

we have floor dinners. There have been times where we just get together to work out and don't anything like and study tables and floor meetings. There was like a meeting with a professor just to talk to them about like anything. My RA is really nice. She will talk to everyone on the floor make sure everyone is doing ok and she is really awesome and she is really good with keeping up with the floor and checking in with us.

This participant had been directly affected by the actions of their RA who helped build a community including such things as open discussion with other residents and eating with a professor.

Theme #2 Keeping home and class separate

There was a consistent theme of the participants wanting to keep their academic life, or their classes and homework, separate from their home life, or their life and time spent in their residence hall or residence hall room. Although the participants realized that some homework or studying was going to happen in the residence hall or in their room, they wanted to minimize this time as much as possible. It was even apparent when the participants were speaking about academic programming happening in the halls in which they lived.

When talking about merging academics and living in a residence hall, participant 2:3 stated "I just think it would really be a stressful environment if you had class on your mind 24/7. I just think it's better if you leave class at class. You can think about it a little at home but not let it consume your life". There was a very large need for this participant

to keep their academic life and social and living life separate in order to not feel constantly overwhelmed by schoolwork.

Another topic in which this theme emerged was in academic programming in the residence halls. Several of the participants stated they had better things to do with their free time in the evenings. Participant 2:2 said “I feel like the student kind of does it on their own time” which refers to a student seeking out the same information which would be provided in an academic program such as a writing workshop or tutoring in the residence halls.

Theme #3 Having a roommate with the same major

When discussing the topic of living-learning communities, two participants stated they thought having a roommate whose major was the same would be just as beneficial as a living-learning community and still allow for the diversity of students and majors within one living community. Participant 1:2 stated this in the following comment. “So I feel if just your roommate had your same major it would help you academically and you would still have the diversity of the rest of the floor.” Participant 2:1 also liked the idea of having a roommate with the same major and found academic benefits in the placement.

I think that it would be really nice to have a roommate with the same or similar major cause then like they would know kind of what was going on like what classes do you need to take if they have taken them the semester before then they can help you out.

In further discussion participant 1:2 reinforced this idea and explained how it could still benefit an undecided major, which a living-learning community could not.

My roommate is just a sophomore and my old roommate was a engineering and African American studies and my new roommate he's already decided he's going into business so I think it would be awesome if I was with an undeclared undecided roommate because then we could be like taking the same classes. We could also talk about what each other is doing and influence each other more and talk about different majors instead of my roommate only knowing about business majors.

Theme #4 Professors seen as main source of academic support

In asking questions about where the participants find a majority of the support for their classes and academic load, most participants immediately identified their professors as the main source of support. Participant 3:2 states in the following quote they know their professors will give them the information they are seeking without having to try and find the information somewhere else. It is the most direct form of action which makes the student feel most supported. "I go to my teachers. I ask them what I need to do, what I should do. That's it. I just listen to what they tell me and do that." Participant 2:5 stated "even my teachers have given us study tips for our specific classes" and that is why she didn't go to hall programs for help. Direct support is readily available, and therefore, they do not seek other routes to academic support.

Summary of Results

The perceptions described by the research participants indicate academic support in the residence halls in which they reside is present, but not always taken advantage of by students. In terms of residence hall staff, the participants feel much more inclined to have discussions surrounding their academic load with their resident assistant over their resident director, but only with their resident assistant if the resident assistant has taken the same classes as they or if they overall feel comfortable with the RA in their living learning community. Participants were not aware, nor did they feel the position of the resident director was to be concerned with the academic life of the residents.

In terms of academic programming in the hall, participants were not likely to attend such programs or were even aware academic programming in the hall was occurring. Most participants felt attending these programs were a waste of their free time and that students should seek the help they need on their own time, and not bring it into the residence hall. There was a clear line drawn for a few participants who stated academics and their personal or life in the residence hall was to be separate.

The physical structure of the building was important to participants in terms of the technology and physical location of the building. The presence of wi-fi outside of their rooms in large study spaces in the residence hall was important. The location of their residence hall in relation to their classes was also a theme which emerged and was important to students in when they returned to their residence hall and their motivation to attend classes.

The discussion with the focus groups in the introduction of living learning communities was mixed, as some felt it would be a great benefit to their academic success and freshman experience while others thought it would be detrimental to their social circle and the diversity of students they would meet. The subject of inter-community competitive nature was addressed as the males thought it would be a motivator to do well in classes and the females felt it would be a deterrent to making friendships with their fellow living-learning community members.

There were four other themes which emerged from the focus group discussions. The four themes were having a social community making academic load seem easier, keeping academic and residence life separate, having a roommate with the same major, and the main source of academic support coming from professors. These themes emerged across all focus groups. Focus on these topics by the research participants indicated that they may be important themes related to the freshman perspective of academic support in the residence halls. Furthermore, greater research on these topics may provide implications for further research and could ultimately indicate the impacts of academic support found in the residence hall setting.

CHAPTER V

Discussion, Recommendations, Conclusion

Discussion

The researcher focused on gaining greater insight and understanding of freshman students' perceptions on academic support in the residence halls and the value of living-learning community programs during their freshman year experience. Various themes emerged as a result of targeted focus group questions that confirmed or contradicted previous research. These results reflect the perceptions of students in terms of how they feel either academically supported or not while living in a residence hall setting.

Focus group participants in this study expressed themes common to prior research. Of particular interest was the idea that an active residence hall community appeared to make academic life easier. Hill (2004) stated residence hall communities play an important role in fostering a sense of place where students feel their life issues are valued. Likewise, this research indicated that participants enjoyed their residence hall community and perceived the community to foster a safe and active place to be authentic. Participants stated by creating strong connections with those around them through the efforts of their resident assistant, they were able to be open and honest about completing homework and studying as well as feeling respected in their decision-making process. This research also confirmed Hill's belief that the resident assistants (RA) promote the sharing of ideas among students as well as contribute to their emotional growth and development of peer relationships which are crucial to the practice of residential living.

Barefoot, Gardner, and Upcraft (2005) stated that university administrators and faculty members expect students to participate in a wide range of developmental experiences during their first year in college. However, this expectation can feel overwhelming for today's freshman students who indicate they face more personal challenges. In reference to research question two, the participants in this study also indicated they felt overwhelmed and as a result were not interested in attending academic programming in their residence hall. They felt it was necessary to keep their academic life and personal "home" residence hall life separate. Riehle and Witt (2009) found in implementing academic programming in the residence hall that students were more likely to attend and be successful if there was an incentive such as free food, or extra credit for a class. This idea was confirmed by the participants in this study who stated, "It depends on if it was for my major. Why would you go to something that you don't need to attend or that you don't get any incentive out of."

Kramer et al (2007) stated the expansion of student learning beyond the classroom had forced the term "teacher" to be redefined. The redefinition of the term is especially important to residential life because of ubiquitous learning such as peer-to-peer and staff-to-student teaching. Likewise, the current research supported this need for redefinition since many participants indicated they make a distinction between instructor and resident director. They do not see the director as someone they could go to for academic support as in reference to research question one which asked what the students' perceptions were of the quality of academic support they received from residence hall staff. The need for a direct academic tie, such as having the same major or academic background as the student, was a consideration the participants made when thinking of

the professional staff member as a source of academic support. Participants also stated they did not clearly understand the role of the resident director and viewed these individuals as managers of the hall and not as an educator or academic support personnel for students living in the residence halls. One participant stated, "I feel that their job is more on the caring side or to help make community. I don't really feel like it's their job to help you with your academics." This may be due in part to the research of Bidgood et al (2006) which indicated Resident Directors are not perceived as teachers because they do not interact on a one-on-one basis with students the way that many classroom instructors do.

Another area of interest in the current study were the perceptions of participants regarding the living-learning communities (LLC). It was interesting to discover participants reacted to this topic along gender lines. Eck et al (2007) stated that students participating in a living-learning program during their freshman year had an increased amount of social interaction and academic achievement. In terms of academic achievement, the males agreed that tying academic programming to the residence halls living would result in better educational outcomes. However, the female participants indicated that tying the two together would result in increased competition and limited diversity. In other words, while the males thought competition would spur them to study harder, the females thought the pressure to compete with their peers from similar majors would increase overall feelings of anxiety and reduce access to students in a variety of different academic fields.

Gender differences within Living Learning Communities were also noted in Arboleda et al (2004) who indicated that females who were less socially active in their

communities were more likely to achieve higher grades in their coursework while males who resided in an all male environment and were socially active were more likely to achieve higher academic achievement. This research supported these ideas and female participants stated they were less likely to be successful in a living-learning community because it would facilitate a competitive environment. In contrast, male participants stated the living learning community would encourage them to be more competitive with each other, and therefore more successful.

Hill (2004) stated students who have access to areas conducive to studying are more likely to use that space and encourage those around them to study as well. Participants in this study stated the areas outside of their rooms which were most conducive to studying were the public areas with wi-fi internet access. One participant reflected on what the residence hall was like before wi-fi internet and stated “that it helps a lot because it means you can basically study anywhere and you can get away from your room.”

Based on the findings above, more research is needed regarding academic support of freshmen living in the residence halls. Further research on the topic of student perceptions could help reveal strategies and programming implementation which would maximize student academic potential while living in the residence halls and in turn, improve student retention. Additionally, providing students with a better resource for academic struggles or successes would be beneficial for their own development personally and academically and would follow the ideals of integrative learning.

The current research indicates a disconnect between residents and live-in residential life staff in the areas of academic inclusion and discussion in the residence hall. Deschamps and Shaikh (2006) called for the field of student affairs to encourage the use of trained professionals in the residence hall setting for the purpose of support in personal as well as academic struggles. A study focusing on the interactions between live-in residential life staff members and the perceptions residents have of the staff members' role would be beneficial in understanding how students perceive the academic support in their residence hall.

Recommendations

Student affairs departments as well as housing and residence life departments should work with their full-time professional staff as well as any graduate staff to redefine their roles as educator and academic supporter to the students whom they serve in the residence halls. It would be a great benefit to students knowing they have a professional staff member living in their building who assumes the role as an academic support and advisor. Beyond redefining the role, it is necessary for the professional staff members to effectively communicate their role and what they can do to provide support to residents from the first day of class to graduation. Without effective communication of this idea, students would have the same perception as they do in this study. It is recommended this perception change begin with training of professional staff members and an addition to position roles and responsibilities to communicate the need for an academically focused residence hall. Disseminating this information to residents living on campus should come through staff members as well as more frequent face-to-face interactions with students in the first six weeks of the academic school year.

This research supports the ideals of living-learning communities. However, another recommendation is specific attention should be given to implementing characteristics of the living-learning community environment into the current state of the residence hall system. Lichtenstein (2005) stated that students involved in living-learning communities had enhanced positive interactions with their roommates and floor mates and that there were stronger levels of academic achievement based on GPA due to the positive interactions. The procedure of placing students into rooms should be based on their incoming major or program intent and students within the same program or concentration area should be placed together as roommates. This would allow for students to have interactions with their roommate based on their academic focus area with their roommate while still having access to students in their community who are interested in other areas. Thus, diversity in the residence hall community is maintained.

In reference to the data collected in the current study on gender differences, it is important for the implementation of living-learning communities or communities which carry the characteristics of a LLC to consider beginning with male students, or even co-educational communities. This would allow for differing views on the competitive nature of males and females to interact and balance each other through encouragement of academic success.

The continuation of wi-fi connectivity is another recommendation and a highly regarded addition to the residence halls by the participants. The ability to go throughout the residence hall and still have the vital connection to the internet for homework assignments and studying is a source of academic support which is supplied by the

residence hall. Students who felt they could not study in their room environment found it convenient staying in their own hall to work on academic projects.

Finally, the current study should be recreated with the use of freshman students who are identified as struggling with a personal challenge such as a mental or physical health issue or struggling with the issue of paying for their education on their own, and in turn working part or full time while still taking a full time student load of classes. This idea was not communicated through the current participants, but with current research focusing on the unique needs of today's student it is important to consider. This would greatly impact how students perceive support as this demographic would require more support in other areas and aspects of their life.

Conclusions

Using qualitative research, the participants in the current study provided data through the use of focus groups to answer the research questions on what students perceive to be academic support in the residence halls. The areas of staff, programming, physical environment as well as comparing perceptions with that of a living-learning environment were outlined in the research questions to allow the participants to interact with one another in the focus group setting and provide feedback based on their experiences and perceptions as a first-semester freshman student.

The fourteen participants described their own perceptions based on the posed research questions and were unique in their own right. However, through cross analysis of the participant responses, themes emerged that suggested the participants were satisfied with certain types of support, such as communities and resident assistants, but

not through others such as their resident directors and academic programming in the residents halls. Suggestions were given as to the implementation of certain aspects of living-learning communities as a form of academic support in the residence halls to freshman students.

The recommendations for this study emerged because of the responses of the participants in the focus groups through the semi-structured environment as well as the integration of previous research.

The findings supported the literature highlighted in the literature review. The results also highlighted areas in which student affairs professionals within housing and residence life can work with freshman students so they can provide a better sense of academic support in the residence hall setting.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study related to freshmen perceptions of academic support in a residence hall environment. This study is being conducted for a graduate student thesis in the College Student Affairs program. As the principle researcher, I hope to gain an understanding of the your perceptions of the quality of academic support you receive from resident hall staff, the quality of academic programming offered in the resident halls and the quality of the physical environment within the resident halls in relation to your learning. You were selected as a possible participant because you fit the general criteria for students I am evaluating (age, on-campus living experience, etc.)

If you decide to participate, I will be facilitating a one to two hour focus group where you will be discussing topics with up to four other students. Information will be gathered during the focus group interview via a video and audio tape recorder. The purpose of the focus group is to gather your perceptions based on your experiences living in the residence halls. You will be asked a series of open-ended questions during the focus group interview and will be encouraged to give your honest opinions in all situations. The risks associated with this study are no greater than those associated with daily life.

Any information obtained in connection with this study and can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be viewed only by the principal researcher and thesis advisor for the study.

Your decision whether or not to participate in this study will not prejudice your future relation with Eastern Illinois University, the department of Counseling and Student Development, or the office of University and Housing and Dining Services. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at anytime without penalty.

If you have any questions, or wish to lodge a complaint or concern please do not hesitate to contact the primary researcher, Kate Schmidt at keschmidt@eiu.edu. You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you may be entitled after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation of this study.

Signature

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date